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LESSONS LEARNT AND A DEBATE TO BE CONTINUED

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At the time of writing this book six years have passed since we finalised *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* (CoRe), a study commissioned by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture (Urban et al., 2011). The study was based on a literature review, a survey in 15 EU countries and a series of in-depth case studies. For this book, these case studies have been revised and updated by their original authors. They provide unique insights into experiences that are not commonly made visible in the international literature in our field – which remains dominated by English as its medium and by experiences and narratives from an English language (US, UK) context. Taken together, the case studies not only show the diversity of possible pathways to develop professionalism in a wide range of early childhood contexts, they also open deeper understandings of how to develop *competent systems* – a concept that was central in the conclusions of the CoRe study.

At the level of the individual practitioner, the English case study shows how the appetite for learning in practice and for continuous professional development (CPD) can be enhanced and it illustrates the relevance of open-minded, proactive teachers. The Danish pre-service training is an interesting example of how personal and academic reflections go hand in hand and are maintained in a delicate balance. Daily practice as a basis for learning and for theorising through shared reflection is key to the experiences of the professionalisation policies of the cities of Pistoia and Ghent and it characterises the approach taken by ESSE (*École Santé Social Sud-Est*) in Lyon, where practitioners with low formal qualifications are educated to bachelor level. The Lyon case sheds light on the complexity behind increasing the levels of qualification, as it illustrates how enhancing individual competences through 'training' can create tensions in the team. Teams need to develop the necessary competences to deal with the changes in professional identity of those who combine work and training. The case studies of Ghent and Pistoia also show how this

relates to competences at the institutional level. The characteristics of the municipal institutions in these two cities enable close collaboration between professionals with different status, and the continuous and reciprocal exchange between professionals and parents from diverse backgrounds. These exchanges result in a common culture and a shared understanding of what is desirable for children, as well as in shared ethical values. A similar key lesson can be drawn from the Slovenian case study, where this common culture has been cherished, despite differences in the professional status of practitioners. The Slovenian and the Ghent case studies also show that working in a context of diversity can increase professional reflexivity, provided the teams can benefit from coaching and inspired leadership.

On the broader scale of interagency collaboration and local governments, the Danish case shows how initial training, working conditions and recruitment are intertwined. Although the Danish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system has a universal coverage (including children under the age of three) the Danish ECEC sector does not experience the shortages of staff or problems of recruitment that dominate the sector in other EU member states. This is due to the high status of the profession of 'pedagogue' and the comparatively high salaries (compared to other countries). The Danish case also provides an example of a common culture and a shared image of the child, an image of an active and competent child that is shared by the colleges, practitioners and the local authorities. This broad interpretation of professionalism in ECEC – characterised by particular attention for the inclusion of culture, nature and aesthetic forms of expression in the initial professional preparation – is probably one of the reasons why there are more male students and male educators compared to other countries.

The key role of competent governance is made clear in several of the case studies presented in this book. Legislations differ substantially across Europe. This is illustrated, for instance, by the fact that in England many different qualification co-exist, while the Danish ECEC services have one general qualification. While the Flemish preschool teachers have parity of pay, compared to primary and secondary school teachers, this is not the case in several other cases presented here. Despite these differences, it is clear that structural conditions (and thus competent governance) are necessary, including decent working conditions, child-free hours for continuous professional development, adequate funding, etc. In all these aspects, the case studies reiterate and deepen different aspects of the *competent system* that is emphasised by the CoRe study. In particular, the Polish case on the WTANT programme eloquently talks about how all these competence levels are interrelated, and how problems at one level impact on other levels. The Polish programme also shows how grassroots organisations can successfully challenge the governance of an education system that is overregulated and teacher-oriented towards mainstream educational institutions.

All case studies bring the analysis forward and have also begun to explore a next level: the international one. Several of the practices described here have benefited from international exchange, thanks to European exchange programmes. There have been peer visits of trainers and practitioners between Pistoia and Ghent, and

between Ghent and Lyon, for instance. But, crucially, the chapter by Nora Milotay also shows how the international level can substantially contribute to competent systems. Whilst ECEC is subject of the principle of subsidiarity, the European Quality Framework on ECEC, which was developed through the Open Method of Coordination, is an interesting example of the important role international organisations can play in promoting quality in ECEC. It is a document that is embedded in research, yet it is also a political document, which has the support of a broad network of stakeholders and policy makers.

Despite all these achievements, it is clear that many challenges remain. Europe is facing an economic downturn and widespread austerity measures (cuts to public budgets) impact on working conditions as well as on member states' investment in initial professional preparation and CPD. Increasingly, the European project seems to accept rising levels of inequality as inevitable, with some countries officially abandoning child poverty targets. The increase in numbers of incoming refugees has unveiled a worrying lack of solidarity between European countries – a fundamental principle of the EU has proven to be dysfunctional. And while Europe keeps building fences (Calais, Hungary) against refugees, growing up under conditions of abject poverty has become a common experience for an increasing number of children from marginalised groups in Europe – most notably Roma and Traveller.

In such times, policy makers may be tempted to concentrate on short-term solutions, while we now know that a long-term vision on ECEC is crucial, as the English case study has illustrated. Sustained investments are necessary, considering the high numbers of unqualified assistant staff in many EU countries. In addition, it is beyond doubt that the diversity of the populations of young children will further increase across Europe. *Competent systems* that are able to deal with diversity, complexity and unpredictability are needed more than ever. In these contexts of increasing diversity (both ethnic and socio-economic) and inequality, it is important to maintain a focus on equal opportunities, equal conditions and more just and equal outcomes (the latter being conspicuously absent from the mainstream early childhood policy debate in Europe. A further challenge is that European approaches to *early childhood education and care* are based on a rather limited understanding of the integration of *childcare* and *early education* as inseparable complements. Within this integration, *care* is too often seen as a function to support learning and early education (Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandenbroeck, 2012). There is still a long road ahead towards a deeper understanding and recognition of the value of care as a fundamental aspect of human society and of democracy (Tronto, 2013). These are challenges that cannot be resolved by isolated and short-term initatives, as these have only a limited impact on daily practice, if any. They require sustained efforts on all levels instead.

The CoRe data and the case studies presented in this book provide a solid evidence base for our key argument: that professional *competence* cannot be sufficiently understood as a characteristic of the individual practitioner (teacher, educator, childcare worker). Instead, *competence* unfolds in reciprocal relationships between all elements of the early childhood *system*: individuals, institutions, and the governance

of the system on national and even on international levels. It is therefore futile (and unsustainable) to concentrate efforts and scarce resources on only one aspect of that system. Our best (and only, as we argue) chance to change practices in order to achieve better, more equitable outcomes for all children and families is to address all elements simultaneously, focusing (and resourcing) the relationships *between* them.

The principle of systemic approaches, highlighted in CoRe, has been received favourably in the European Union policy context. The 2011 EU Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission, 2011) explicitly states that systemic approaches to professionalising the early childhood field are needed; this message is endorsed by Member States (Council of the European Union, 2011). The recognition of the *competent system* approach at EU level is mirrored at national and local level across Europe. BKK, the Dutch '*Quality Bureau child care centres*' responsible for taking initiatives to increase the quality of the childcare services in the Netherlands was inspired by CoRe; it has set up 11 pilot projects to develop competent systems in childcare organisations (Boonstra and Jepma, 2014). At local level, to give just one example, the City of Utrecht, The Netherlands, has drawn on the CoRe principles to rewrite its municipal Quality Framework for childcare services (City of Utrecht, 2013). On a larger scale, a major player in the German early childhood context, the Bertelsmann Foundation, is adopting the concept of *competent systems* as its key strategy to promote reform of the early childhood system across Germany's federal structure and is currently funding an international research project to extend the original CoRe project beyond the EU. Countries like Ireland are beginning to recognise the need for a systemic approach to reforming their desperately fragmented early childhood system.

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the recommendations of the CoRe project have influenced new legislation on childcare, indeed the new law states that every person who works with young children (from birth to three) must be supported by a pedagogical coach. To implement this new law, a large-scale project on coaching was set up within independent childcare centres (Vlaamse Regering, 2012).

The need to *professionalise* the early childhood workforce has long been at the centre of the discussion about forming and reforming early childhood services in Europe and internationally. With it came an often-controversial debate about concepts and understandings of *professionalism* in early childhood. Over the years the authors of this book and many others have contributed to this debate, arguing that professionalism in early childhood care and education cannot be understood with mere traditional structural-functionalist, managerial or technocratic concepts (Miller, Dalli & Urban, 2012; Oberhümer, 2005; Oberhümer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010; Oberhümer & Ulich, 1997; Peeters, 2008; Urban, 2008). Local organisations, but also international networks like DECET (www.decet.org) and ISSA (www.issa.nl) have brought together researchers and practitioners to redefine professionalism to promote social justice, diversity and equality for all children and adults in early childhood. The CoRe project, including the case studies presented in this book, has extended this thinking about what it means to be professional in early childhood into the wider context of the early childhood policy and practice

system. All of this was – and continues to be – crucial for the development of practice and academic discipline in our field.

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